

## **Portuguese Timor and the idea of civilization**

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### *Introduction: Geographic and cultural distances*

As Governor of Portuguese Timor from 1859 until 1863, Afonso de Castro fostered a great ambition to bring development to this remote territory which was still considered to be at point zero. He, as well as the authorities in Lisbon, wanted to develop it according to their own views, and moreover their own interests. As it turned out, their way of bringing “civilization” which was to be continued for generations of successors would take a heavy toll on the population and did not achieve the desired results, so piously professed. It is this ill-conceived and ill-fated attempt of civilizing that will be addressed in this text.

Portuguese Timor was for a long time viewed in Portugal as a faraway corner of the world, the distance accentuated by poor communications and transport links. It had gained the reputation of being a lonely, disease-ridden place, and more than once it was referred to as the *antecâmara do inferno* (“the ante-chamber of Hell”)<sup>1</sup>. It was unhealthy because of the prevalent malaria and other diseases, which often were lethal for newly-arriving Europeans. The environment was also considered to affect the mental health of Europeans living there. On a visit to Dili in the early 1880s, Anna Forbes sighed: “... a walk through the streets leaves a depressing effect on the spirits. .... [it is] not a lively place.” (Forbes 1987: 231), Indeed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, life was dull and insalubrious for the Europeans, and they tried to escape as soon as possible (Tamagnini 2002; Gunn 1999: 142).

The judgment the Portuguese had of the conditions in the territory and of its population was not much better: “Timor vegetates, in Portuguese hands, in the most awful misery.” (De Castro 1867: 47.) Governor Afonso de Castro drew up this balance in the 1860s, at a moment when a page was being turned in the history of Timor. In 1859 the protracted negotiations between the Portuguese and the Netherlands

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<sup>1</sup> This expression, with a question mark, was the subtitle of a book by Teófilo Duarte (1930).

about the territories claimed by both these two powers had been concluded. The resulting treaty demarcated, as far as possible, the internal border in Timor, revised the allocation of territories on the island to each of the two imperial states, and recognized Dutch sovereignty on the islands of Solor, Alor, Pantar, and in the Larantuka zone of East-Flores.

This loss of presumed sovereignty on Flores was one more blow to Portugal which had in the preceding decades become a second-rank state, nothing compared to its status on the European stage in the Era of Discoveries. The country had been losing much of its influence in Asia, its profitable colony Brazil had become independent in 1822, and Portugal's efforts to compensate for this to some degree in Africa were not running smoothly.

The new Governor, De Castro, was not disheartened by the small area of Portuguese Timor, or by the lack of effective control by the Europeans. He believed he had a mission in Timor, for the benefit of the entire Portuguese empire: "We have to reach out our hand to the colonies in their misery, and through them reclaim our place among the foremost colonial powers. That is the rank to which Portugal is entitled through the two archipelagos of Cape Verde, Guinea, the two islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, the vast territory of Angola, Mozambique, Goa, Macao, and Timor." (De Castro 1864: 395.) Within Southeast Asia, Portuguese Timor might be only a tiny spot on the map, but this could have its advantages, De Castro argued. In his wishful thinking, Portugal could now concentrate fully on the development of Timor (De Castro 1864: 394).

But if this were to be realized, the administration and economic policy should be altered, preferably in the style of the Dutch, colonizers of a considerable part of the Southeast Asian archipelago. The Dutch, according to De Castro, had turned the island of Java into "the pearl of Oceania" (De Castro 1867: 47). The Portuguese governor was quite familiar with the situation in Java, with which he had become acquainted during his visits to the island, the conversations he had with high-ranking officials of the Netherlands East Indies, and simply through reading and correspondence (De Castro 1867: 420). His scientific curiosity, already

revealed by his previous journalistic work in Portugal, fitted his ambitions for the Portuguese empire. With his ideas and methods, De Castro, a key figure in East Timor history, would commence a trend which was to persist throughout the colonial period.

In 1854, Afonso (Affonso) de Castro (1824-1885) had been elected representative for the Timor constituency in the Portuguese parliament (although he then had never set foot in the island, by no means an exceptional situation in the history of the Cortes). In the 1850s, he attended, as a secretary to the Portuguese delegation, the negotiations between the Netherlands and Portugal regarding the territories in the Timor zone and carried out the necessary documentation research (De Castro 1862: 467).

In Timor, his inquisitive nature was instrumental in the production of some fine ethnographic accounts, describing social organization, customs, and the material culture of some of the ethno-linguistic groups. The governor was impressed by the great number of languages, and points out that by that time Tetum had replaced Malay as the contact language in eastern Timor. He informs us: “Tetum is the language which we may call official. It is the language of the chiefs and its use is common in Dili and other Portuguese posts, and in the realms of the centre and the west, as far as Batugade.” (De Castro 1867: 328). Among the other languages he mentions “Vaiqueno”, “Galolo” and “Calado”, the latter being spoken “in the mountains around Dili”<sup>2</sup>. Despite his patent interest, he had no high opinion of the beauty of the Timorese languages, which he considered “savage” and “rude” and quite different from the “mellifluous” Malay languages, which had a script and had produced “poets and good prose-writers” (De Castro 1867: 328-329).

On a par with their languages, he considered the overall culture of the Timorese to be on a low level, while the Javanese were in his view on a step of the ladder midway to “civilization”, the higher culture such as this

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<sup>2</sup> De Castro 1867: 328. Vaiqueno (other names: Dawan and Atoni) is spoken on the western half of the island, including the enclave Oecussi; Galolo is the language around Manututu and the term Calado, while in reality not referring to a specific language group, has in various periods of east Timor’s history referred to the people of the western part of the territory.

existed among the Europeans. By using this classification, De Castro reveals himself to have been a true nineteenth-century intellectual, a follower of the evolutionary school which classifies human cultures in various stages, in the belief that any culture, earlier or later, will progress to a higher stage. One of the best-known and most influential authors of this school was Lewis Morgan, who in his *Ancient Society* (published in 1877) argued to have identified a nearly universal traject of savagery to barbarism to civilization.

Although De Castro believed that the Portuguese presence would be instrumental to the acceleration of the Timorese in their journey towards the stage of civilization, so far the Portuguese had left very few marks in this respect. At least this was the experience of the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace when he sojourned in Dili, “a most miserable place”, in 1861 (Wallace 1962: 144). “Yet”, he found, “there is one thing in which civilization exhibits itself. Officials in black and white European costume, and officers in gorgeous uniforms, abound in a degree quite disproportionate to the size or appearance of the place.” (Wallace 1962: 145.) Comparing Dili with other localities in the Eastern Archipelago, where he found fortresses once built by the Portuguese and still relatively well preserved under Dutch rule, Wallace could not help but exclaim “Oh Lusitania, how hast thou fallen!” (Wallace 1962: 293.)

De Castro was well aware of the lack of control of the Portuguese over the population, while he considered the two highest priorities in the process of bringing “civilization” the firm establishment of Portuguese authority and the economic development of the territory. He had high hopes of the development of agriculture, which would mean that “... the population will increase, new needs will cause the industries grow, and civilization will flood with its light that land which has up to now been locked in the darkness of *barbarity*.”<sup>3</sup> The similarities with the views of Wallace, who supposedly had had several conversations with the Governor, are striking. Wallace was also a great admirer of the Dutch colonial system (Wallace 1962: 72-75) and exposed his ideas especially in

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<sup>3</sup> De Castro 1867: 362. Italics in the original.

relation to his findings in Minahasa. In this region in the northern part of the island of Sulawesi (Celebes), the Dutch exerted a harsh regime, including a system of compulsory coffee cultivation. At the same time, elements of European culture had been successfully introduced, so that the inhabitants, not long before feared for their savagery and belligerence, had become “the most industrious, peaceable, and civilized [people] in the whole Archipelago.”<sup>4</sup>

### *The dark side of “civilization”*

The Portuguese sovereignty over the Timorese territory, which had been laid down in the official documents pertaining to the Dutch-Portuguese treaty on Timor of 1859, still had to be conquered in practice. It was not an easy task for the Portuguese to impose their authority on the polities and this became even more difficult when unpopular measures started to be implemented, especially regarding taxes.

Armed intervention was often deemed necessary. Among the warring parties there was hardly a European to be seen, as the majority of the Portuguese armed forces consisted of indigenous auxiliaries (*moradores* and *arraiais*) and also of men hailing from other parts of the Portuguese empire, such as Mozambique, Angola and Goa. Strategic use was shrewdly made of such characteristics inherent in Timorese society as the animosities between the various polities and the key role of headhunting in ritual and for prestige.

As such, the paradoxical situation arose of the use of the state of “savagery” in which the Timorese lived according to De Castro, more particularly their inclination to war, in introducing “civilization” by force. The Portuguese authorities stimulated bravery in warfare against non-compliant groups by the offering, in solemn ceremonies, of presents to friendly Timorese warriors who handed in the heads of slain adversaries. In a text written in 1860, De Castro called this “*fête des têtes*” a “*véritable*

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace 1962: 194; see Schouten 1998: 53-74.

sauvagerie” but he justified the active part the Portuguese authorities played in it by stating that this was the best means to achieve the goal of pacification. He finishes his account of the ceremony as follows: “That is the *festival of heads*, to which the Timorese attach great importance, an importance to such a degree that it would be dangerous not to permit them this repulsive scene; the effect of such a restriction on their pleasures would be very bad.” (De Castro 1862: 560.)

The, apparently definitive, repression of a series of massive revolts in 1861 was marked by this sort of great “festival” in Dili, organized by the Government. The ritual headhunters’ dance was performed for an audience in which the Governor occupied the place of honour. Shortly before, a group of victorious Timorese troopers, uttering blood-curdling screams, had passed through the triumphal arch erected for the occasion, decorated with verses of Camões, and then expressed their allegiance to the King of Portugal, to Portugal and to the Governor (De Castro 1861: 407, 409; Pélissier 1996: 47; Oliveira 2006: 31). This was a strange but probably effective mix of elements of the centuries-old cultural heritage of the Portuguese, acknowledgment of submission to Portugal, and “savage” customs.

This revolt was among the bloodiest, but it was a routine strategy for the Portuguese - before and after De Castro - to exploit the warrior spirit of the Timorese and the value attached to severed heads when local rebellions needed to be suppressed. Some very cruel battles were still to follow, especially in 1893, “gigantesques chasses aux crânes”, as the French historian René Pélissier (1996: 294) typified them. The suppression of the great revolt by Boaventura (1911-1912) was also marked by a gruesome “head festival”, graphically described by Pélissier (196: 294). And in many of these battles, the Portuguese seemed to be prepared to pay for the severed heads, some of which found their way to Europe and into the museums, in a period in which phrenology was a respected scientific discipline (Schouten 2001).

Of course, it was not only the Portuguese who made use of martial indigenous people to attain their goals. Examples of such tactics are

abundant. We may mention the strategy of the VOC (the Dutch United Company of the East Indies) in Formosa during the seventeenth century, in the Java War (1825-1830) the reliance of the Dutch on native auxiliaries - including the belligerent Minahasans from North Sulawesi-, and the support given by the dreaded Iban to James Brooke's ventures in Sarawak, in the mid-nineteenth century (Blussé 1995: 168-169; Schouten 1998: 75-85; Wagner 1972). Neither should we, at a more general level, ignore the unscrupulous actions undertaken by colonial powers, such as the Dutch who launched numerous military expeditions in the Indies at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century. In Aceh, in a war which lasted more than three decades, at least 75,000 people (15 per cent of the population) were killed by the Dutch Colonial Armed Forces (Schulte Nordholt 2000: 6-9.) And this was more or less simultaneous with the proclamation, in 1901, by the Dutch government of the "Ethical Policy" for the colonies, which aimed to improve the welfare of the indigenous population. This all explains why De Castro apparently had no hesitation in presenting his gruesome account of the abuse of headhunting raids, which he had authorized himself, for publication to the periodical of the Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences), a learned society in Batavia, the capital of the Netherlands East Indies.

If Timorese customs indubitably were useful to the Portuguese in their military expeditions, as exemplified by headhunting, there were certain traditions which were counterproductive to their aims, such as the intermarriage between the reigning families of the various polities. This implied a special relationship between the *reinos* (polities), in which there was no place for warfare. An ally of a rebellious polity might be forced to supply troops to the Portuguese as well as to their "blood ally", and then, on the battlefield, they would spare each other, and might just fire into the air<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the testimony in 1870 of the captain of the corvette Sá da Bandeira, cited in Gunn 1999: 184.



Much Timorese blood was spilled in battles during the Portuguese colonial presence; but this was not the only cause of grievous suffering during the process depicted as aiming to “develop” the territory. The circumstances under which the Timorese had to work on the coffee plantations, and supplying compulsory labour for road building and the construction of other types of infrastructure were deplorable; the taxes they had to pay left them with almost no resources for themselves.

The conditions on the plantations, deplorable at the time of Celestino da Silva (the governor who introduced coffee cultivation on a grand scale, at the end of the nineteenth century) would not improve in the following decades. As attested by Clarence-Smith (1992) and Timorese authors (Cardoso 1997; Gusmão 1993), the regime on the coffee enterprises bore the traits of slavery. An eye-witness account published in the Australian periodical *Smith's Weekly* of 1932 (cited in Gunn: 234-235) conveys the harsh, cruel regime on at least some of the plantations, and the sadism of the men in charge.

In 1923, another visitor, H.O. Bron, blamed misguided policy for the under-exploitation of the immense opportunities of, in particular, coffee and minerals in eastern Timor: “The Portuguese want to profit too much and too easily without giving anything in return.” (Bron 1923: 100-101.) As it was not profitable for the Timorese to sell their produce, they had no incentive to make any great efforts. And the author includes in his report some words reminiscent of the nineteenth-century accounts: Dili is a miserable settlement, and the land offers a dreadfully bad impression.

Some serious doubts about the concept of “civilization” in Timor are revealed in the work by Paulo Braga. The popular booklets written in the 1930s by this political exile about Timor are imbued with romantic suppositions in the spirit of the “noble savage”. But it is worthwhile citing the author’s account of a visit to the island of Ataúro, in which he mentions the five things he found related to “civilization”: “a fortress in ruins; a grave with a cross; a European who collects the taxes; a Chinese trader who exploits the darker sides of misery and a limekiln where the naked people work.” (Braga 1936: 4-5.)

### *A continuing story*

During the Portuguese colonial presence, even after the so-called pacification of 1912, the people of eastern Timor saw and experienced plenty of wartime misery. More or less compulsory labour under appalling conditions would also persist until at least the 1960s.

“Civilization”, however, continued to be embraced by the Portuguese rulers as an elevated principle, just as it had been in the time of De Castro. The idea persisted that in a more or less natural process the Portuguese presence and activities would eclipse the traditional customs (*usos e costumes*), and that the indigenous people would assimilate to Western culture. At the few schools existing in the region the boys were taught Western-style handicrafts, the girls practised needlework in diverse Portuguese styles. This was a cause for the waning of the expertise in the techniques of *ikat*, the beautiful textiles embellished with special patterns. A role was also played by the prohibition by the authorities, in 1954, on men wearing traditional clothes in the towns – they were required to don Western-style shorts or trousers.

The Portuguese authorities emphasized their civilizing mission or White Man’s burden, a slogan which was underlined even more forcefully after the Second World War when the world-wide wave of decolonization was initiated. The Government could draw support from Gilberto Freyre’s theory of *Lusotropicalismo*, which suggested the existence of a special form of culture or of life-style, characterized by tolerance, in the (former) Portuguese colonies, resulting from the exchange of cultural elements between colonizers and colonized (Freyre 1998 [1933]). Portuguese authorities embraced this pseudo-theory as a justification for their persisting colonialism, underlining the positive nature of social and cultural life in the tropical areas under Portuguese colonial rule, but studiously omitting the part of the Freyre’s thesis which enunciated the

equality between the different cultures and peoples. Portugal remained convinced of its own cultural superiority.

The activities of Portuguese anthropologists and ethnographers bear witness to this attitude. The descriptions of Timorese social and cultural life produced by Afonso de Castro would rarely, if ever, be matched by others in the following decades. For a long time, the anthropology of Timor would be carried out in the metropolis, by studying skulls, photographs, and also the physical characteristics of the Timorese who were present at the great Exhibitions in Portugal of 1934 and 1940 (Schouten 2001). Perceptive and valuable studies in the field of cultural anthropology would only begin to appear in the 1950s and 1960s, with Ruy Cinatti. His promising work could however not be developed and deepened, partly because of Cinatti's fall from grace with the authorities (Oliveira 2006).

The cultural anthropology of Timor started to be seriously sponsored by the Government in the 1950s, the various missions of António de Almeida leading the way. This scholar described in a meticulous but unimaginative way an incredible number of topics (pertaining to the areas of cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, palaeontology, botany and linguistics). In some of his publications, he points out the importance of the civilizing activities of Portugal. He highlights the health and police services, the introduction of maize, cattle, agricultural tools, matches and nylon and elastic products, beyond leather-cloth wear, and a new type of dwellings (Almeida 1994: 459). These would all contribute to the, officially so desired, «Portuguezation» (*aportuguesamento*) of Timorese society. The paradox of Almeida as an anthropologist lies in the fact that he studied practices which, in his opinion, were condemned to disappear and to be replaced by the Portuguese customs, a development which he applauded. This ambiguity can be explained by the strong links of Almeida with the Portuguese Government, which at the time stood almost alone in the world in its colonial convictions.

Afonso de Castro had professed his ideas about civilization and tried to put some of them into practice, in a heavy-handed way. His views and actions may be explained by the influence of the international intellectual and political climate of his time. However, a century later, there was no possible justification for the Portuguese objectives and performance. In whatever way we may choose to define civilization, it is surely not identical with a forced “development” and a loss of the own culture.

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